Introduction

There is an ancient story which runs as follows. A man was walking along the road when he saw in the distance what he thought was an animal. When he got closer he saw that it was another human being. And when he got closer still he saw that it was his brother. How do we view others? Are the distinctions of 'animal, human being, brother' ethically relevant? The theme of this book is an exploration of the concept of person-hood in relation to a Christian ethic. Not just, 'who am I?', but 'who are *we*?', where 'we' might include all living creatures. What the concept means, and whether it is as important as it has been claimed to be, are just two of the questions we shall try to answer.

Personhood has occupied a position of importance in ethics since Locke and particularly since Kant. Among contemporary moral philosophers the questions and issues have been refined, but a strongly positive attitude to ethical personhood has been endorsed by writers such as P. Singer, M. Tooley and D. Parfit, although there are equally strong voices of dissent (e.g. R. M. Hare; B. Williams), which regard personhood as too ambiguous to bear such weight. The emphasis in either case has been on rational, moral criteria linked with personhood.

In Christian ethics the position is rather different. There has been a long tradition of relating ethical demand to the nature of God who is understood in personal terms as holy and loving, but emphasis on personhood in an ethical context has come to the fore in recent discussions about the Trinitarian nature of God and the comparison between human and divine person-hood in terms of relationality.

1

Whether personhood should have the importance that is currently attributed to it is the subject of this investigation. Not all the claims can be accepted. Some are incompatible. There is a need to listen to the arguments and sift them carefully. There is also a need to understand at least the main outlines of a long and complex historical development.

Concepts of person are socially constructed. They embody social and religious values about the nature of human personality and individuality in relation to society, and are usually associated with other significant ideas about the nature of the self, such as mind, body or soul; or freedom, responsibility and accountability; personal identity and survival; relation to others, including non-human animals and the environment; belief in God.

Mauss' essay (1938) on the concept of person forms the starting point for an examination of how and why 'person' has become such an important but 'fragile' and vexed concept.[1] Mauss regarded the concept of person as having reached its clearest expression in Fichte. His thinking was strongly influenced by Durkheim, whose high estimate of the individual was combined with a strong belief in the importance of society. The relation of individual and community remains a significant issue today. Personhood cannot be understood in terms of the isolated individual. Mauss also draws attention to the need for a supporting metaphysic, which he discerned in the Christian faith, firstly in its Christological debates and later and more clearly in the emphasis on personal experience found in revivalist groups of the eighteenth century.

Various criteria have been proposed for distinguishing 'persons' from entities that are not persons. It has become widely accepted in recent ethical discussion that 'person' is a moral concept and that the criteria for distinguishing 'persons' from other entities must be moral criteria. There are dissentient voices, however, and some philosophers are sceptical about the value of such a concept as 'personhood' because it is elusive, vague and ambiguous. This, combined with its normative status, makes the dissenters wary.

'Personhood' has also played a prominent role in contempo-

rary debates about the identity of 'persons', both in the sense of what criteria are relevant to establishing personal identity (should one rely on material or mental criteria, body or mind ? Does body in this case simply stand for the brain?) and the criteria that are relevant to establishing what constitutes identity over time (is X at time 1 the same as X at time 2?). What is the relationship of persons and human beings? Are they identical? What are the criteria of personhood? Are all or only some human beings persons? Who or what else, apart from human beings, qualify as persons?

'Persons' have been variously defined in terms of material criteria such as body or brain, mental criteria such as self consciousness, rationality or intentionality, moral criteria such as rights or respect, and religious criteria such as soul or relationship to God. Since the nineteenth century, but particularly in recent years, 'persons' have come to occupy a position of unparalleled regard in the competing value-systems of pluralist societies. What Kant said of rational persons is now claimed by or for all persons. 'Rational beings are called persons because their nature already marks them out as ends in themselves . . . unless this is so, nothing at all of absolute value would be found anywhere.'[2] So highly are persons regarded across a wide spectrum of popular opinion (e.g. groups campaigning for a better status for their constituents – civil rights, women's rights, animal rights, to name but a few), that some philosophers have wondered whether 'person' has become a term of pure evaluation, devoid of clear descriptive content.

'Person' has become a boundary concept over which there is debate because it is so highly prized, on the one hand, yet at the same time its application is contested. Some traditional social and religious values, particularly with regard to non-human animals and the environment, have come to be regarded as inadequate and even grossly defective, and the application of personhood has become part of this re-evaluation and re-positioning of personhood and value. Feminists and others have put a fundamental question-mark against what they see as the unjustified assumptions of Enlightenment thought, which has tended to exalt rationality and human

rights as marks of personhood. Personhood is understood by
feminists primarily in terms of embodiment and relationality.
One of the purposes of our analysis will be to disentangle the
different lines of thought which contribute to the meaning of
personhood in contemporary ethical debate and to assess their
significance.

Although 'persons' are often thought of as essentially rational
human beings, capable of moral agency, and valuable for that
reason, there is another view which thinks of persons as
essentially human beings, normally rational, but including also
those who are not yet fully rational, such as infants, and
potential human beings such as foetuses, and all those, such as
the senile, who have lost their rational faculties. It is sometimes
assumed that 'human being' is a purely biological category,
unlike 'person' which is a social or moral category, and that the
two views represent conflicting models which may not even be
strictly comparable. 'Persons, not humans, are special', accord-
ing to one writer.[3] In fact, both 'person' and 'human being'
may represent something of value and what we are dealing
with is a clash of values, in that each is prizing something
different or representing a different way of catching the value
of personhood.

The meaning of 'person' is certainly more complex than the
straightforward contrast of 'person' and 'human being' allows.
In its long history, 'person' has meant a number of things. As
the mask worn by the actor in ancient drama, 'persona' may
refer to the face or outward appearance, which may disguise as
well as reveal who I really am. Similarly, psychologists may
refer to the 'persona' as a social front or shadow self which
conceals or hides the real self. On the other hand, it may also
refer to an ideal or inner self, which contains the secret of who
I really am. Ideal, real, fictitious, unconscious selves – who is to
decide? For the sociologist, the person may refer to a role in
society, and who I am may be understood in terms of my
occupation and other roles I occupy. Not surprisingly, in view
of their search for the true self, religions may find the person in
the self which survives death or in communion with God.

In contemporary ethics it is the contrast of 'person' and

'human being' which has dominated discussion. This contrast, even opposition of person and human being, will be examined in Part I through some of the writings of contemporary moral philosophers, particularly P. Singer, M. Tooley and D. Parfit, all of whom have given personhood a significant place in their thinking. Important differences in their positions will be pointed out, but it will be argued that all three have been too ready to develop the distinction of person/human being found in Locke's account of personal identity, and to couple it with Kant's emphasis on personhood as the embodiment of value *par excellence* in the modern world.

Although 'personhood' has continued to be associated with 'human being', both in popular thought and philosophy, recognition of the logical distinction of person and human being has led to increasingly frequent attempts to specify the essential criteria of personhood without reference to accidental properties of being human, until eventually they have been not only 'separated out' but 'contrasted' and even 'set in opposition'. One of the reasons for this has been the neglect of the overall context in which discussion about personhood and being human are set. So, for example, neglect of the idea that human being is not simply a biological category, but may represent a term of value within a religious/theological context, has contributed to the polarisation of the concepts of 'person' and 'human being' and to the failure to understand a theological ethic, which supports an ethic of personhood without devaluing human being or setting personhood and human being in opposition.

Part I as a whole, therefore, is marked by the attempt to reposition personhood and being human, and to indicate their closeness and the links which connect them. It also illustrates how ideas once applied pre-eminently to God have been diffused and attributed almost exclusively to others, especially human beings, in order to support their perceived worth. The quasi-sacred character of 'persons' is at the heart of many dilemmas of modernity, and discussions in Feuerbach about personhood are examined to illustrate these developments. This historical background, which helps to explain why person-

hood often holds the position it does in modern thought, also
confirms the need for caution about proposals that construe
'person' as a purely moral term.

Part 2 is concerned to explore a different set of contrasts and
relationships involved when a religious/theological context is
taken into account and God is thought of as person (or Trinity
of persons). This view adds another dimension to the idea of
person, and makes it necessary to reconsider what is involved
in being both person and human. Moreover, if God is a person,
who or what else might be regarded as a person?

The idea of divine personhood is complex, and it requires
both analysis and historical investigation. Although the picture
is still incomplete in some respects, it is becoming clear that the
introduction of 'person' terminology into the theological
debates of the early church was drawing on 'prosopological'
exegesis which attempted to relate divine speech in the Bible to
the different persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the
doctrinal debates surrounding the credal formulations,
however, terminological correctness and the translation of
terms in East (Greek) and West (Latin) created considerable
problems, which were to reverberate for many centuries. The
Greek *hypostasis* (subsistent reality) would normally have trans-
lated the Latin *substantia* (substance), but the Alexandrian use of
mia ousia, treis hypostaseis (one being or substance, three subsis-
tent realities) was adopted and developed by the Cappadocians
into a Trinitarian exposition which capitalized on the flexibility
of hypostasis to represent divine reality in distinction and
relation. This has encouraged some recent commentators (e.g.
Lossky; Zizioulas; LaCugna) to argue that the Cappadocians
were responsible for the introduction of an ontology of rela-
tional personhood. 'The concept of the person with its absolute
and ontological content was born historically from the endea-
vour of the Church to give ontological expression to its faith in
the triune God . . . If God does not exist, the person does not
exist . . . The person, both as a concept and as a living reality,
is purely the product of patristic thought.'[4] Against this must be
set uncertainties of interpretation in the terminological disputes
of the fourth century. Philosophically and theologically divine

personhood remains an issue of lively debate, involving ques-
tions of divine impassibility, embodiment and temporality. For
some commentators, however, it has to be said that divine
personhood is a red herring in relation to human personhood,
because, whatever terms are used, personhood cannot be
predicated of God's triune being in the modern sense of
individual agent. For a variety of reasons modern philosophers
have been more willing than theologians to examine what
might be meant in saying that 'God is a person'. On the other
hand, they have not always appreciated what is involved in the
Trinitarian discussions. Theologians, while recognising the
importance of God's personal agency and purpose and God's
personal character of holy love and loyalty, have preferred to
speak of God's triune being, since God is not strictly speaking a
being at all, but Being itself.

In Christian tradition, however, there is another way, more
securely attested, of referring to divine personhood. This is
based on the analogy of divine and human personhood and
God's creation of humanity in the divine image (*imago dei*, cf.
Genesis i 27). How this image is to be construed (e.g. in terms of
physical likeness; rationality; spirit; responsibility; relationship)
raises further questions. Theological anthropologies are con-
structed out of human experience with the help of revelation. It
is not possible to bypass this process in favour of a single
revealed theological anthropology. The attempt to model
human relationships on intra-divine Trinitarian relationships
seems to be in danger of overstepping this limit and positing a
knowledge which we do not have. To suggest that interpersonal
relationships are impossible without Trinitarian foundations is
unnecessarily to disinherit those whose personalism is huma-
nistic but not Christian. What the Christian rightly affirms is
that participation in the mystery of God's Trinitarian life is
mediated for Christians through faith in Christ and participa-
tion in the body of Christ in worship and service.

It is important for Christian theology to be able to indicate
the nature of divine personhood and to be able to relate this to
(the relational nature of) human personhood. But they remain
different. It is mistaken, we contend, to argue that without

Trinitarian presuppositions the resultant human person must become a self-enclosed individual, isolated from effective relationships with others. Even if Trinitarian relations are the ontological presupposition of all relations, this does not give Christians the right to assert this as if it were an empirical truth about all relationships. It is only because of the judgement that relations are essential for the understanding of human persons (which may have empirical support) that we are led to recognise the important way in which the relationality of divine persons may be significant for human personhood. W. Pannenberg has made a good case for thinking that from the point of both human self-understanding and a Christian understanding of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, divine personhood embodies ecstatic relationality (the way in which personhood is manifested in relation to another) more fully than human personhood, which necessarily retains elements of self and autonomy.

Divine and human personhood are analogous, but not identical. The importance of the analogy is that it lends support to a view of human personhood (which has support in human experience also) which allows for a transcendental dimension to existence. It is impossible to capture fully what a person is; there is always more to be said, more to be discovered, not simply in the sense that the human story continues into the future, but that being human involves qualities of character and community which point to the realisation of perfections rarely or never found in any human character or community, yet fundamental to human existence and valuing. Personhood is a way of distinguishing what is of ultimate value from the rest of nature. The *imago dei* motif in Christian theology draws attention to the relationship of divine and human personhood. If humanity is made in the image of God, then creation provides a substantial basis for understanding human values.

What was begun and undertaken gloriously in creation, however, was immediately threatened and distorted by the exercise of human freedom against God. The story of human creation is overshadowed in scripture by humanity's refusal to

abide by the conditions of the original covenant between God and humanity. The Old Testament narrates successive attempts to restore the covenant on the part of God, but in the last resort humanity always refuses to identify with what God wills. A variety of mediatorial instruments (law, sacrifice, obedience of heart and will) are tried, but in the end all fail. The New Testament narrates the coming of the One who fulfils the ancient promises. Reflection on his death and resurrection leads to the view that as an instrument of salvation the law is ineffective and can be done away with, although its ethical stipulations (e.g. do not kill) remain valid and are to be kept. New and more demanding stipulations (e.g. do not be angry; refuse lustful desire) become part of the new covenant. The sacrificial system is replaced by the one eternal sacrifice of Christ whose life and death was offered to God without reserve in a way that was felt to fulfil all prophetic expectation. This fulfilment, which the early Christians found in the life and teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus, is the beginning of a new and final era of salvation, in which the transformation of human personhood is the first fruits of a transformation of the whole of creation. It is not surprising that the intra-divine life should be the source of this transformation. Caution is needed, however, in applying this to concrete, practical ethical problems and situations. The transformation associated with personhood is of crucial importance, but human personhood cannot be assimilated to divine personhood without the lifelong process of what in an earlier generation was called 'sanctification'.

What is involved in a Christian ethic is explored by asking what a Christian perspective requires, and developing a view which allows faith commitments full expression but without denying the role of critical reason. The effect of regarding humanity as in need of, and capable of, divine renewal and transformation is examined in order to develop a narrative Christian ethic which is not incompatible with a natural law ethic, but able to do more justice to the richness of insights stemming from the Christian faith, particularly in terms of relationality.

The problematic of a Christian ethic which is both universal and contextual in reference can be overcome, it is argued in Part 3, by closer attention to the Christian story of God's covenant with humanity which culminates in the coming of Christ, and to a contextual emphasis in the consideration of contemporary ethical situations and issues. The new covenant issues in an ethic of love modelled on Christ's teaching and example. One of the central features of this is 'love of neighbour', which does not exclude anyone, even the enemy. Some recent discussions of Christian ethics (e.g. Hauerwas) have argued that this requires a 'qualified' rather than a universal ethic, and a recognition that a Christian ethic as practised by Christians should not be distorted by harnessing it to secular premises and secular goals. The ideal of a rational ethic common to all persons is regarded by Hauerwas as mistaken and unworkable. The view taken in this study is that such a view ignores valuable features of both a Christian and a common ethic. For that reason we outline a modified form of Habermas' rational discourse ethic, not in order to devalue the insights of communitarians, but in order to bring communitarian and liberal ethical standpoints closer together. The significance of both forgiveness and human rights in a Christian ethic is considered in order to indicate two structural features of such an ethic. The study concludes with a discussion of other concerns which have featured in Christian thinking about personhood, including the eschatological transformation of all creation.